

Crewe, Robert Offley Ashburton
Crewe-Milnes, 1st marquis of
War and English poetry

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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 38

War and English Poetry

By

The Most Hon. the Marquess of Crewe, K.G.

President 1916

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WAR AND ENGLISH POETRY

IN his notable lectures *On Translating Homer*, which are a classic of our criticism, Mr. Matthew Arnold sets out what he calls the four cardinal truths essential for the right conception of the Greek poet—that he ‘is rapid, that he is plain and direct in word and style, that he is plain and direct in his ideas, and that he is noble’. The *Iliad* is the supreme war-poem of the world; there is no second to it; and I believe that it is reasonable to take its qualities, thus competently judged, as a general standard for reference from time to time during a survey of English poetry related to war. All the more that for three hundred years, since Chapman wrote in 1610, Homer has been rendered into English by many minds and in many metres: by poets who were imperfect scholars, and by scholars who were moderate poets; by two poets not far from the first rank—Pope and Cowper; by a Prime Minister—the fourteenth Lord Derby—in days when statesmen were still expected to know Greek. And it will perhaps appear that although we have no great British epic of war, and it is safe to predict that we never shall, a like test may properly be applied to our war-narratives in verse, of which there are many, and even to the more familiar host of war-lyrics.

There is fighting, indeed, in our one great English epic, when there was war in Heaven and Michael and his angels encountered Satan and his. The mustering of the Hosts of Hell is perhaps the grandest descriptive passage in English poetry, but the combats themselves are unsatisfying. The debt to Greece and Rome is too naked; and if, even in the *Iliad*, the wounding of Ares by a mortal leaves us somewhat cold, the routing of Moloch, who obviously had not a shadow of a chance against Gabriel, and

Down-cloven to the waist, with shattered arms
And uncouth pain fled bellowing,

borders on the grotesque. I cannot dispute Dr. Johnson’s verdict that ‘The confusion of spirit and matter which pervades the whole narrative of the war of Heaven fills it with incongruity; and the book in which it is related is, I believe, a favourite with children, and gradually neglected as knowledge is increased’.

Descending again to earth, and to our native land, I have no desire, had I the capacity, to carry this sketch back to the beginnings of English poetry, Saxon or Early English. Nor is it necessary to enter into the dispute which has raged over all ballad poetry—whether a ballad can be ascribed to a single author, known or forgotten, or whether it represents a series of improvisations, added to or modified at the pleasure of the particular singer or narrator, and finally assuming a shape in which it can be written down. Students of the subject have pointed out that ballads easily tend to turn into chronicles, or even to adopt the epic form. A minstrel might celebrate a notable contemporary event, or he might chant the glories of some immediate forbear of his patron or chief, and he or another might in time weld the separate links into a long-drawn chain.

But by whatever process of evolution, the fourteenth century amid its blaze of fighting produced one or two writers who set down permanently in vernacular verse their glorification of famous warriors. We who are not mediaeval scholars need regard these authors with no terror, for the later Transition English in which they wrote is simple in construction, and demands only occasional help from a glossary or note, like the English of Chaucer.

Of Laurence Minot nothing is known but his name, and that only because he ushers in with it one or two of his poems, which were discovered a hundred years ago, by accident, in the British Museum. But he writes in North-country English as a fierce partisan, and he must have gone with the armies of Edward III either as fighter or as gleeman. It is not great poetry, for there is no deep thought or rich imagery; but it goes with no little swing and pace, as in the spirited story of Crécy, or in the Calais Burghers' complaints of their hardships, when there were

Neither coney, nor cat, nor keen hound

that was not eaten; or in the tale of the sea-fight with the Spaniards off Winchelsea in 1350, which reads like a foretaste of two centuries later, describing the Spanish ships bearing

Great welthes as I wene,
Of gold and of silver,
Of skarlet and grene.

The dark Spaniard, 'boy with the black berd', is warned to keep clear of the English coast on pain of being 'domped in the depe', in the true ballad spirit. Perhaps the most vivid of the poems tells of the fight of Neville's Cross, when 'Sir David the Bruce' was stirred up by the French to foray into England while King Edward was at

Calais. You can see the Scots horsemen with their field-equipment of a bag of oatmeal:

From Philip the Valois
Was Sir David sent
All England to win
From Tweed unto Trent:
He brought many bere-bag
With bow ready bent;
They robbed and they reived
And held what they hent,—

and so on.

John Barbour, the other memorable war-poet of this century, was born in 1316. He became Archdeacon of Aberdeen, and was nevertheless a sober churchman, unlike the youthful archdeacons of such worldly repute in the twelfth century that the well-known scholastic question was propounded, 'whether it is possible for an archdeacon to be saved?' His great work, *The Brus*, is a romantic history, half epic, half chronicle, inspired by Statius rather than by Homer. It is in twenty Books of some 12,000 octosyllabic lines, and I cannot suppose that many people have read them all. There is a great deal tedious to modern taste; but it is brightened by a feeling for nature, comparable, though greatly inferior, to Chaucer's, as in the charming opening of the fifth Book about Spring. There are some good stratagems and adventures, too. In one¹ of them two hundred men of Galloway are defeated by a Homeric ruse; and in another² Bruce eludes his trackers by travelling up the bed of a burn. In the fight at Loudon Hill³ we see the sun on the shields and bassinets, pennons and spurs lighting up the fields, hauberks as white as flowers, and coat-armour of fair colour,

Like angels high of heaven's land.

Then there is the prowess of Douglas,⁴ Bruce's Homeric combat with Henry de Bohun at Bannockburn,⁵ and the dashing pursuit of the beaten English. Edward Bruce,⁶ valorous and rash, is the necessary foil to his faultlessly wise and brave brother; and Douglas, whose death in Spain ends the poem, is the faithful Achates with whom no hero of romance may dispense. The one passage from *The Brus* which has found its way into anthologies is the invocation to Freedom;⁷ but some of the adventure episodes are of at least equal value.

In the next century, another Scot, Blind Harry the Minstrel, wrote *The Wallace*, a long poem also in rhymed heroic metre and of some

¹ Book VI.

² Book VII.

³ Book VIII.

⁴ Book X.

⁵ Book XIII.

⁶ Books XIV, XV, XVI.

⁷ Book I. 228.

merit ; but generally speaking there follows a lean season for gleaners in this special field. Chaucer, who went to France rather under compulsion, as a prominent official not as a soldier, was taken prisoner some three years after Poitiers. Even this did not turn his muse to battle-pieces, which I do not pretend to regret. I know of no war-poetry attributable to his immediate successors. Gower wrote part of his *Vox Clamantis* after Jack Straw's rebellion, but this was in Latin ; and Lydgate and Occleve cared for none of these things. One famous poem no doubt belongs to the fifteenth century, though existing copies date from far later. This is *Otterburn*, with the ballad of *The Hunting of the Cheviot*, which is now believed to refer to the same battle, though the two stories differ much in detail. It is the joy of modern research to root up familiar beliefs, and it has been triumphantly pointed out that there was no such hunting—that *Otterburn* is some distance from the Cheviots—and that 'Chevy Chase' is merely a corruption of *chevauchée*, a mounted raid. This is needlessly ingenious, as such exposures are apt to be. Anyhow it is a fine chivalrous tale, as must have been its older and rougher form, whereby Sir Philip Sidney 'found his heart moved more than with a trumpet'. He must have liked hearing how Hotspur, after making his challenge, slung a pipe of wine over the walls at Newcastle, and

There he made the Duglas drink
And all his host that day.

and how

The Percy leanèd on his brand
And saw the Duglas de;
He took the dede man by the hand
And said Wo is me for thee.

The invention of printing and the Revival of Learning did nothing to turn poetry into a war-like channel. Indeed the tendency of the sixteenth century was the other way, towards a nicer refinement and quite a different order of romance. Wyatt and Surrey, treated as twin brethren of Art, spent their lives in no calm backwater ; but the songs and ballads of each tell of breaking hearts, not of broken heads. Skelton's satires are altogether pacific. Action was left to the coarser handling of the balladist until the day came for its presentment on the stage ; and the whole body of Tudor writers down to Sir Philip Sidney and Spenser himself may scarcely have comprehended that in some ways they were treading an easier path through the Courts of Love and the glades of fairyland. But many of the ballads, or fragments of them, lived on, some in several gradually deteriorating versions, until Thomas Percy issued the *Reliques of Ancient English*

Poetry in 1765. Of those in the collections my own favourite, possibly the best old ballad in English, is the tale of Andrew Barton, the Scottish privateer captain who fought against the two Howard sailor brothers in the Downs in June, 1511. Four hundred years are a mist that rolls away when the English traders are heard lamenting :

To France or Flanders dare we not pass,
Nor Bordeaux voyage dare we not fare,
And all for a false robber that lies on the seas
And robs us of our merchant-ware.

In admirable stanzas the fruitless climb to the mainmast-tree of Barton's lieutenants, Hamilton and Gordon, to release the great booms that should crush the English seamen, is followed by the captain's own ascent, in his gold-wrought armour. And when he, too, is smitten by arrows between the joints of his harness,

Fight on, my men, says Sir Andrew Barton,
I am hurt but I am not slaine,
I'll lie me down and bleed a while
And then I'll rise and fight again.

Fight on, my men, says Sir Andrew Barton,
These English dogs they bite so low,
Fight on for Scotland and St. Andrew
Till you hear my whistle blow.

But the whistle never blows ; and the ballad ends as the sea-rover's head, with its dreadful eyes, is brought as a trophy to King Henry, and shown to the queen and 'her ladies bright'. I conclude that the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella was martial enough to value the attention.

As the sixteenth century was closing, and the era of Henry VIII's famous daughter reached its climax, the battle-poetry of England expressed itself in the two fresh forms of the drama and metrical chronicle. I cannot pretend in this sketch to examine those spots in the wide field of tragic play-writing where the trumpets of war are sounded. There are passages in Shakespeare's tragedies as familiar and as real to us as the stories of how Wolfe or Nelson died : Othello's farewell to war, it has been said, 'makes us drink deeper of the cup of human life'; the parting of Brutus and Cassius remains the eternal pattern of every manly farewell before going into action :

If we do meet again, why, we shall smile ;
If not, why then this parting was well made.

I must not linger over even the historical Plays of Shakespeare and his fellows : in these days one is tempted to dwell on *Henry V*, the

inspiration of so many brave souls in this present war, but the ground is too accessible and well-trodden. On the other hand the historical chronicles in verse, unread, and inspiring nobody, need not detain us long. It was not in a lucky moment that Clio formed this particular partnership with her poetical sisters. The combination lasted through most of two centuries, but it is dead now past any revival.

Samuel Daniel and Michael Drayton were born within a year of each other, in 1562 and 1563. Both of them were excellent poets, and each devoted long labour to a metrical history.

Drayton's *The Barons' Wars*, in eight-line stanzas, is a careful annal of Edward II's reign. There are some spirited stories of battles, and a happy use of place-names and titles that is almost Miltonic. The historical values are sometimes novel, for the motives of everybody appear excellent. The king is pliable but harmless, the queen, stigmatized by Gray's Bard as the 'she-wolf of France', is here 'a virtuous lady, goodly, fair, and young', and the two Mortimers are like Knights of the Round Table.

Drayton also composed a chronicle of the Agincourt campaign in 321 Spenserian stanzas, not lacking in rapidity of movement, but with not much poetry in them. As we shall see in a moment, he was differently inspired by the same subject.

Samuel Daniel wrote eight books of the *History of the Civil Wars*, opening with the reign of Richard II, and finishing raggedly with the marriage of Edward IV. It is a history-book with no fire or emotion. Ben Jonson remarked of the earlier parts, 'He wrote Civil Wars, and yet had not one battle in all his book'. And he certainly seems more at home with the love-making of Edward and Elizabeth Grey. But Daniel could profit by a lesson;—for instance, when we read of Edward before Towton,¹ warning his army

So that if any here doth find his Heart
To fail him for this noble work, or stands
Irresolute this day; let him depart
And leave his Arms behind for worthier hands.
I know enow will stay to do their part
Here to redeem themselves, wives, children, lands,
And have the glory that thereby shall rise
To free their country from these miseries.

we approve, but note that this section of the poem appeared in 1609, and that *Henry V* was first given just ten years before. And other similar plagiarisms could be quoted. It may be surmised that Drayton and Daniel were both affected by the excessive admiration

¹ Book VIII.

for Lucan prevalent in their age, which ranked him as at least the peer of Lucretius and Virgil. Now the pendulum has swung too far the other way, and the *Pharsalia*, except for the few golden phrases that everybody knows, is little read, and is set down as almost tiresome. Drayton, however, broke loose with his ballad of *Agincourt*, which is in every anthology, and would probably secure the prize in a referendum on British war-poems. It certainly obeys the Homeric canon by being rapid, and plain both in idea and in expression. Noble like a passage from the *Iliad* it is not; but dignity is not sacrificed to pace, and it escapes marvellously from being a jingle. I do not apologize for quoting

Fair stood the wind for France
When we our sails advance,
Nor now to prove our chance
Longer will tarry;
But putting to the main
At Caux, the mouth of Seine,
With all his martial train
Landed King Harry.

Then, after the king's fine speech, and the catalogue of the princes :

They now to fight are gone,
Armour on armour shone,
Drum now to drum did groan,
To hear was wonder;
That with the cries they make
The very earth did shake,
Trumpet to trumpet spake,
Thunder to thunder.

And this stanza where one can imagine similar epithets in rolling Greek :

With Spanish yew so strong,
Arrows a cloth-yard long,
That like to serpents stung,
Piercing the weather;
None from his fellows starts,
But playing manly parts,
And like true English hearts
Stuck close together.

In quite another vein, and introducing a different novelty from that of the drama or the metrical chronicle, is Walter Raleigh's Elegy on Philip Sidney, grave and unadventurous, as Raleigh's poetry sometimes is.

There didst thou vanquish shame and tedious age,
 Grief, sorrow, sickness, and base fortune's might;
 Thy rising day saw never woeful night,
 But passed with praise from off this earthly stage.

Back to the camp that day by thee was brought
 First thine own death; and after, thy long fame;
 Tears to the soldiers; the proud Castilian's shame;
 Virtue expressed, and honour truly taught.

What hath he lost that such great grace has won?
 Young years for endless years, and hope unsure
 Of fortune's gifts for wealth that still shall dure;
 O happy race, with so great praises run!

England doth hold thy limbs, that bred the same,
 Flanders thy valour, where it last was tried;
 The camp the sorrow when thy body died,
 Thy friends thy want; the world thy virtue's fame.

There is a certain sententiousness here which has an eighteenth-century flavour; the age of Shakespeare might have sounded a more plangent note of grief for the passing of so adored a figure as Sidney's. Perhaps it is a pity that Donne never tried his hand at a battle poem. In the fine verses of *The Storm*, which averted a great sea-fight, he is almost within the domain; and had he celebrated Sidney, or Drake, or Grenville, might he not have joined to the tireless observation and insight of his poetry some of the dignity of his magnificent prose?

So far, be it noted, the passions of love and of war had not blazed side by side in English poetry. The age of chivalry, or at any rate of tournaments, was gone before they began to brighten the firmament in company. At all times there is no resisting the combination. Turn once more to Homer and the lines in the third Book of *Iliad* where Helen misses her brothers from the Greek ranks before Troy, which Matthew Arnold loved to quote in Dr. Hawtrey's rendering:

Dare they not enter the fight or stand in the council of Heroes
 For fear of the shame and the taunts my crime has awakened?
 So said she; they long since in Earth's soft arms were reposing
 There, in their own dear land, their Fatherland, Lacedaemon;

and the picture, in the sixth Book, of Hector, the spotless knight, with his wife and child is one of the scenes in great poetry that remains untouched by every change of time and manners, and even

of creed : for did not so flawless a churchman as Keble take it as the text for one of his poems on the most solemn season of the Christian Year? ¹

Perhaps, too, in the whole range of English lyrics there is no stanza which has satisfied more minds than the last of Richard Lovelace's *To Lucasta on Going to the Wars* :

And this Inconstancy is such,
As you too shall adore;
I could not love thee (Dear) so much
Lov'd I not Honour more.

It must have been implicit in many good-byes in these last years ; and since the pleasure of make-believe does not expire with childhood, not a few honest gentlemen, of neither military age nor capacity, may have hugged beneath their broadcloth, under the spell of the Cavalier Colonel, the joint sentiments of the Perfect Lover and the Happy Warrior.

Later on Lord Dorset was to strike a different though not unworthy note of compliment, marking the change of circumstance after the Restoration.

Meanwhile Edmund Waller, who could serenade as lightly as anybody, figured also more appropriately as John Hampden's nephew with a series of poems on martial themes. But his uncle might have disowned a political Vicar of Bray, who could follow up the fine panegyric on the Lord Protector by an ode on His Majesty's Happy Return. There is an old story that Charles remarked on the inferiority of the latter, and received the reply rather in his own manner, 'Poets, Sir, succeed better in fiction than in truth'. Waller was treated with confidence by James II, and died a year too soon to write a welcome to William III, to whom he had already addressed in 1677 a not too flowing laudation.²

These lines on the war with Spain and the victory of 1651 near St. Lucar are a not unfavourable specimen :

Others may use the ocean as their road,
Only the English make it their abode,
Whose ready sails with every wind can fly
And make a covenant with th' inconstant sky ;
Our oaks secure, as if they there took root,
We tread on billows with a steady foot.

¹ *The Christian Year*, Monday before Easter,

² *To the Prince of Orange*, 1677,

Night, horror, slaughter, with confusion meets
 And in their sable arms embrace the fleets.
 Through yielding planks the angry bullets fly
 And of one wound hundreds together die;
 Born under different stars, one fate they have,
 The ship their coffin, and the sea their grave!

Great affairs, rather than war, are the note of Marvell's poetry of 'high philosophic statesmanship',¹ and of Milton's 'trumpet' sonnets; and when the Restoration brought no laurels by land, poetry had still to look seaward for heroes.

I have already mentioned the excellent lines of Charles Sackville, the sixth Earl of Dorset, *Written at Sea in the First Dutch War, 1665, the Night before an Engagement*. This was the great victory of the 3rd of June, marked by the destruction of eighteen ships and the capture of fourteen. A merit of the lines is in the barely indicated feeling underlying the gay address that

To all you ladies now at land
 We men at sea indite.

The nonsense about tears being brought by the tide to Whitehall Stairs touches on genuine emotion, as nonsense at dangerous moments may; so do the lines:

When any mournful tune you hear
 That dies in every note;
 As if it sighed with each man's care
 For being so remote,
 Think then how often love we've made
 To you, when all those tunes were played.

A greater than Dorset was busy in celebrating the deeds of the Fleet in the Dutch Wars, but with a heavier hand. No less than a hundred of the elegiac quatrains of Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* are devoted to the action fought off the North Foreland by Monk and Prince Rupert. Nothing that Dryden wrote is trivial; but it has often been noted how his genius grew in stature and strength, and how his work of twenty years later excelled such a poem as this. 'A tedious performance,' is Hazlitt's verdict.

Albemarle laid his fifty English ships against seventy-six Dutchmen, and thus addresses his crew:

If number English courages could quell
 We should at first have shunned, not met our foes,
 Whose numerous sails the fearful only tell,
 Courage from hearts, and not from numbers, grows.

¹ F. T. Palgrave, *Golden Treasury*.

Nothing is gained by turning what may have been a fine speech into pedestrian verse ; but here is a bold descriptive passage of the encounter at dawn when Rupert appeared to the rescue of his outnumbered comrades :

against the adverse fleet

Still doubling ours, brave Rupert leads the way,
With the first blushes of the morn they meet
And bring night back upon the new-born day.

His presence soon blows up the kindling fight,
And his loud guns speak thick, like angry men ;
It seemed as Slaughter had been breathed all night,
And Death new-pointed his dull dart again.

Dryden lived on to within a few months of the close of William III's reign, but he sounded no accompaniment to the earlier stages of the long tussle with Louis XIV. This task fell in the first instance to Matthew Prior, who enjoyed the rare advantage of knowing personally many of the principal actors and advocates on both sides. Thus, when Namur fell into our hands in 1695 he was in the best position to retaliate on the gorgeous so-styled Pindaric Ode in which Boileau had celebrated its capture by the French king three years before.¹ This he does, stanza by stanza ; the Frenchman had told how 'dix mille vaillants Alcides' had mined the walls and opened yawning sepulchres of sulphur for the foe ; Prior points out that at the second siege,

Full fifteen thousand lusty fellows
With fire and sword the fort maintain,
Each was a Hercules, you tell us,
But out they marched like common men.
Cannons above, and mines below
Did death and tombs for foes contrive,
Yet matters have been ordered so
That most of us are still alive.

Still more pompously Boileau had proclaimed that the besiegers of Troy would have taken twenty years to reduce Namur, and mocked the generals who were going to march from the Thames and the Drave to Paris. Prior is quite equal to the occasion :

If Namur be compared to Troy
Then Britain's boys excel the Greeks,
Their siege did ten long years employ,
We've done our business in ten weeks.

¹ *Sur la Prise de Namur par les Armes du Roi, l'Année 1692.* The title of Prior's poem is *On the taking of Namur by the King of Great Britain, 1695.*

Then, reminding us that William was a first-class soldier and Louis no soldier at all,

When his high Muse is bent upon 't
 To sing her King, that great commander,
 Or on the shores of Hellespont
 Or in the valleys near Scamander,
 Would it not spoil his noble task
 If any foolish Phrygian there is
 Impertinent enough to ask
 How far Namur may be from Paris?

A question, by the way, which might have been put in a different sense to another potentate from the banks of the Spree, in September 1914 after the battle of the Marne.

One likes to recollect Namur, both for the sake of Prior's lines and because it was there that Uncle Toby got his wound, in the taking of 'the advanced counter-scarp', which he reproduced by the bowling-green behind the tall yew hedge.

After Blenheim Prior again dealt with his friend Boileau in this vein of half-serious banter. Perhaps none of the later labourers in the same cheerful vineyard—Canning, or Praed, or Thackeray, or Frederick Locker, or Mr. Austin Dobson—has quite touched the perfection of Prior at his best, with a flow so smooth and yet so sparkling, so facile and yet so pungent. But some of his patriotic poetry was graver and much less distinguished; the glorification of William in imitation of Horace, and the *Carmen Seculare* of some years later, belong to this class, as does the *Ode to Queen Anne* in 1706, with its long survey of English History.

These were the early days of party politics, and men of letters had to be pamphleteers. Long before *Cato* was regarded as a political tract, Addison, starting in the Whig interest, had laid at the feet of King William an *Address on the Flanders Campaign*; for example:

Our British youth, unused to rough alarms,
 Careless of fame, and negligent of arms,
 Had long forgot to meditate the foe,
 And heard unwarned the martial trumpet blow.

and later on:

Namur's late terrors of destruction show
 What William, warmed with just revenge, can do.
 Where once a thousand turrets raised on high
 Their gilded spires, and glittered in the sky,
 An undistinguished heap of dust is found,
 And all the pile lies smoking on the ground.

Prior on Namur is preferable ; but when the great day of Blenheim arrived Addison had to produce the eulogy, which he did in *The Campaign*, stigmatized afterwards as 'a Gazette in rhyme', and rewarded at the time by Godolphin with a suitably prosaic Commissionership of Appeals. It is dull reading, in spite of Bishop Hurd's praise of the well-known simile of the angel riding the whirlwind as 'the sublime in perfection'. Dull also, and mechanical, is the Tory parallel and rival *Blenheim*, entrusted by St. John and Harley to John Phillips, the writer of that gentle satire *The Splendid Shilling*, and mainly interesting as being composed at that particular date in Miltonic blank verse by an adorer of Milton's genius. The author, by the way, must be carefully distinguished from another John Phillips, with two l's, who was Milton's nephew, and who wrote satires and lampoons in a vein which must have scandalized his uncle sadly.

The progress of the eighteenth century brought out little martial poetry. Richard Glover published *Leonidas*, an epic of Thermopylae in twelve Books of rather uneven blank verse, the scanty story being eked out by the introduction of many romantic characters, including the sister of Xerxes, and Artemisia, Queen of Caria. He also wrote the ballad of *Admiral Hosier's Ghost*, said to be in turn politically inspired, and founded on the ghastly tragedy of Porto Bello in 1725, when the Admiral and nearly the whole Fleet perished of fever, and upon Admiral Vernon's victory there fifteen years later. There is an odd air of the nineteenth-century balladists about the verses ; they might be by Lockhart or Aytoun :

Heed, O heed our fatal story,
 I am Hosier's injured ghost,
 You who now have purchased glory
 At this place where I was lost.
 Though in Porto Bello's ruin
 You won triumph free from fears,
 When you think of our undoing
 You will mix your joy with tears.

The remainder of the Spanish War and the Continental campaign which included Dettingen, Fontenoy, and Minden, called forth no verse that can be considered extant. Certainly Erasmus Darwin's dreary *Battle of Minden* is not. It has been left to a writer of our own day, the late Mr. Frank Taylor, in his spirited volume *The Gallant Way*, to describe the prowess of George II at Dettingen, and also the famous advance of half a dozen Line Regiments to the rub-a-dub of *Minden Drums*.

Nor did Arcot or Plassey find a sacred bard ; and by a fate stranger still, the end of James Wolfe, the most romantic figure among British Generals, remained unsung in any verse that has survived.

The beautiful lines of William Collins *How Sleep the Brave* date from 1746, and David Garrick's song *Hearts of Oak* belongs to the 'Wonderful Year' 1759. The rollicking Ballad of *The Arethusa* is also of this time. Then Burns from time to time sounded a trumpet note, while Cowper's *Toll for the Brave*, though not exactly a war-poem, is a warrior's noble elegy. Dibdin's sea-songs were no great poetry, but they helped to keep alive the glow of national pride.

The French Revolution and the Empire that succeeded it jointly brought a new inspiration into English poetry. Coleridge, Wordsworth, and even Southey, the unbending Tory of later years, sang together like the morning stars, and shouted for joy, when the dawn of Liberty appeared. When the wider vision faded the emotion was concentrated into a chant of power and lofty patriotism such as had not been uttered since Milton died, finding its noblest expression in the Sonnets of Wordsworth, and in his great poem *The Happy Warrior*. Mr. Arthur Acland has done a service to the public by bringing together, in a small volume, the *Patriotic Poetry of Wordsworth*, with an enlightening commentary ; and I will not encroach on the field so well tilled by him, to say nothing of the equally apposite pamphlet issued by Dr. Boas for this Association. It is evident how the hugeness and duration of the struggle, the colossal personality of the opponent, and the terrific national strain, forbade thoughtful men to be content with mere Viking war-chants, or with narratives on the classical model ; for their natures were stirred to the depths, and their hearts were on fire. Accordingly in their different ways other poets of that generation, Byron, Scott, and Campbell, breathed into their battle poetry a larger portion of their finer spirit than could most of their predecessors who had worked on parallel lines. Coleridge was the first to recant his Republican fervour, and his divine fancy was hardly drawn into that region of the concrete in which the poetry of war ordinarily moves. Southey, the most conscientious of toilers, was both more prolific and more concerned with war. Probably a hundred readers have enjoyed *The Battle of Blenheim*, with its pretty irony,

But things like that you know must be
At every famous victory,

for one that has glanced at *The Pilgrimage to Waterloo* and digested its too patent moral lessons ; it deserves reading once for the sense of landscape and the reality of description. Nor do people trouble much

over the *Carmen Triumphale* celebrating the Peninsular victories, or *The Battle of Algiers*, which might be almost any battle. But the wheel of time, and the sound dread of an inconclusive close to this War, have lately brought into view the *Ode written during the Negotiations with Bonaparte in 1814*:

Who counsels peace . . .
 When Freedom hath her holy banners spread
 Over all Nations, now in one just cause
 United; when with one sublime accord
 Europe throws off the yoke abhorred,
 And Loyalty and Faith and ancient laws
 Follow the avenging sword.

Worth recalling, too, is the Epitaph on an ensign of the Peninsula, exquisitely classical in its close:

. . . He who in days to come
 May bear the honoured banner to the field
 Will think of Albuera, and of me.

Poetry doubtless lost what tactics gained, when young officers were no longer permitted to carry the colours into action.

Walter Scott was gifted with all the attributes of a martial poet except, as Matthew Arnold contends, that his rapidity is jerky rather than flowing, and thus misses the complete nobility of Homer. He did not ignore the war of his own day; but one thinks more of the fight in *The Lady of the Lake*, and most of *Marmion* and Flodden Field. Perhaps also of the prelude to *Marmion*, and the famous lines on Nelson, and the two rival statesmen of the war in their neighbour tombs.

Jeffery wrote that 'It is a trite remark that poets generally fail in the representation of great events when the interest is recent, and the particulars are consequently clearly and commonly known'; but though Sir Walter would no doubt have accepted the criticism for himself, and with some justice, he would not have allowed it to be applied to the third Canto of *Childe Harold*, of which he observed, 'I am not sure that any verses in our language surpass in vigour and feeling this most beautiful description'. Without committing himself so deeply anybody may agree that the scenes of the Ball at Brussels, the far sound of the guns, the contrast of romantic partings, the hurried march in the dawn, and the sacrifice of noble lives, combine in a picture which has fairly stood the test of excessive exhibition.

Byron's art stands out typically in such lines as these on the death, at Waterloo, of his friend Major Howard:

There have been tears and breaking hearts for thee,
 And mine were nothing, had I such to give;
 But when I stood beneath the fresh green tree
 Which, living, waves where thou didst cease to live,
 And saw around me the wide field revive
 With fruits and fertile promise, and the Spring
 Come forth her work of gladness to contrive,
 With all her reckless birds upon the wing,
 I turned from all she brought to those she could not bring.

Thomas Campbell, alone among English poets who have written much besides, takes really high rank solely from three or four of his war-poems. *Hohenlinden*, according to the author 'A mere drum and trumpet thing', and somewhat tarnished in most memories by having been treated as a schoolroom jingle, is the best short battle-piece from the time of Drayton's *Agincourt*, and was praised without stint by Walter Scott. *The Battle of the Baltic*, less perfect, has some great lines; and *Ye Mariners of England* is unique in being the elevated adaption of a popular song. *Hohenlinden* gains greatly in merit by its happy employment of an unrhymed but assonant dactyl at the close of each verse: apart from the classical hexameter I can recall no metrical device which so well maintains a certain due solemnity without sacrificing the not less imperative quickness of movement.

The Burial of Sir John Moore stands in public repute like a solitary column; but just as 'Single-speech Hamilton' delivered a series of elaborate orations in Parliament, so Charles Wolfe, the Irish parson, wrote many other poems in his short life. *The Battle of Busaco*, for instance, is a fair specimen of ten-syllable couplets in the eighteenth-century manner.

After 1815, forty years of reaction and revolution, of industrial growth and commercial expansion, produced little war-poetry in the strict sense. Keats's fancy roamed elsewhere; Byron's passion for the liberty of Greece, and Shelley's for the liberty of mankind, need no illustration here; but another lover of Liberty, belonging to a school altogether foreign to Newstead or to *Nightmare Abbey*—Lord Macaulay, devoted to battle most of his small output of verse. *The Songs of the Civil War* and *Ivry* appeared in Knight's 'Miscellany' about 1824, *The Armada* ten years later, and the *Lays of Ancient Rome* in 1842. In the main it is poetry which average people, by no means tasteless, will not cease to read and enjoy, and which some critics will continue to disparage. To Matthew Arnold Macaulay was doubtless, in many aspects, an intolerable person, but specially so as the writer of the *Lays*. 'The power to detect the ring of false

metal in the *Lays* is a good measure of a man's fitness to give an opinion about poetical matters at all,' he says, and quoting the stanza

Then out spake brave Horatius,
The Captain of the Gate:
To every man upon this earth
Death cometh soon or late,

he adds 'it is hard to read without a cry of pain'.¹ On the other hand, I have heard a living critic whose judgement I greatly respect aver that such a verse as this, from the same *Lay*, is in the true line of ballad succession: before Horatius plunges into the Tiber,

Round turned he as not deigning
Those craven ranks to see;
Naught spake he to Lars Porsena,
To Sextus naught spake he;
But he saw on Palatinus
The white porch of his home;
And he spake to the noble river
That rolls by the towers of Rome.

Perhaps it is right to admit of Macaulay what Hazlitt said less fairly of Scott, that 'his poetry leads to no results, it is only entertaining'. It is concerned, he meant, more with the outward and visible than with the inward and spiritual. But it is much to be entertained; and when the diversion is provided from Macaulay's wealth of knowledge, backed by metrical skill and an almost Homeric mastery in the use of proper names, there is nothing to complain of. The poems are all story, and they never languish. Their worst passages are those that lend themselves most easily to parody, where the art is mechanical and is in danger of becoming cheap. Probably Matthew Arnold was as much incensed by the school which regarded the *Iliad* as a loose bundle of rude ballads, as by Lord Macaulay himself.

I pass on to Crimean and Mutiny days. The Russian campaign was singularly picturesque in its setting; war was a novelty to most men under sixty; and the band of Victorian poets was at its fullest strength. The result was a large output of high average merit, Tennyson taking the lead, and followed by Archbishop Trench, Sir Francis Doyle, the Lushington brothers, Sidney Dobell, Gerald Massey, and many more.

The weak point in Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade* did not escape contemporary critics, one of whom wrote that 'Horses do

¹ *On Translating Homer. Last Words.*

not gallop in dactyls, the anapaest is the true pace for equestrian lyrics; . . . Mr. Tennyson's lyric has a deliberate ease not suited to the desperate valour of the Six Hundred'. This is quite true: the pace can only be maintained thus:

'She is won! we are gone, over bank, bush, and scaur,
They'll have fleet steeds that follow,' quoth Young Lochinvar.

or in the gallop *From Ghent to Aix*, or by *Bonnie Dundee*, the familiar air to which the cavalry thunders past at a parade. For this reason, and for others, *The Charge of the Heavy Brigade* is a finer poem, and ought to have the higher reputation.

The two Lushingtons, Sir Franklin the lawyer, and Henry the scholar and official, had the root of the matter in them, though Sir Mountstuart Grant-Duff exaggerated in saying that there are no finer patriotic poems than theirs in our literature. Either brother might have said with the French poet, 'Mon verre n'est pas grand, mais je bois dans mon verre'.

Here is the opening of *The Muster of the Guards* by Franklin Lushington, from *Points of War*:

Lying here awake, I hear the watchman's warning—
'Past four o'clock',—on this February morning;
Hark! what is that? there swells a joyous shiver
Borne down the wind o'er the voices of the river;
O'er the lordly waters flowing, 'tis the martial trumpets blowing,
'Tis the Grenadier Guards a-going—marching to the War.

Bridge of Waterloo! accept the happy omen,
For the staunchest friends are wrought out of the bravest foemen:
Guards of Waterloo!—the troops whose brunt you bore
Shall stand at your right hand upon the Danube's shore;
And Trafalgar's flags shall ride on the tall masts, side by side,
O'er the Black Sea and the Baltic, to sweep the waves of War.

Note the march *tempo* and the sustained swing.

Henry, one of the most beloved men of his day, succeeded equally in such pictures as that of the Russian attack at Inkerman:

But night-work in the trenches
Held down our heavy eyes,
And the dim dank morning
Made for a surprise.

Through the dim dank morning,
O'er soppy ground and still,
Thousands, thousands, thousands,
Are creeping round the hill:

Thousands, thousands, thousands,
Are crossing by the bridge;
Sections, lines, divisions,
Crown and crowd the ridge.

.
Then as their great grey masses
Closed on our line of red,
The rush, the roar, the wrestling,
The growing heaps of dead,

On the stony hummock,
In the brushwood glen,
Backwards, forwards, struggled
Fiercely-fighting men.

Eye to eye we saw them,
Hand to hand we came;
In their very faces
Sent our volleying flame;

Time was none for loading—
One crashing musket-peal:
The bullet for the foremost,
For the next the steel.

.

The whole volume is well worth reading in these days.

So is Sydney Dobell's *England in Time of War*. I have never been able to understand why Dobell is so utterly neglected,—even among Victorian poets, who must not be admired too much nowadays. The times should reawaken interest in this particular book, and a new reader will find that *Tommy's Dead* is one of the most poignant poems anywhere, and that its humble drama, and that of the Scottish piece *The Mother's Lesson*, must have been repeated in a hundred farmsteads during this War. The subtler reflections of *Home, Wounded* are in a different vein; and the irregular metre will appeal to some:

O to lie a-dream, a-dream,
To feel I may dream and to know you deem
My work is done for ever.
And the palpitating fever
That gains and loses, loses and gains,
And beats the hurrying blood on the brunt of a thousand pains,
Cooled at once by that blood-let
Upon the parapet;

And all the tedious taskèd toil of the difficult long endeavour
 Solved and quit by no more fine
 Than these limbs of mine,
 Spanned and measured once for all
 By that right hand I lost,
 Bought up at so light a cost
 As one bloody fall on the soldier's bed,
 And three days on the ruined wall
 Among the thirstless dead.

Dobell's friend, Gerald Massey, one of the small band of peasant-born poets, also wrote a vivid ballad of *Inkerman*, and such blank verse as this :

We cannot fear for England, we can die
 To do her bidding, but we cannot fear :
 We who have heard her thunder roll of deeds
 Reverberating through the centuries ;
 By battle fire-light had the stories told ;
 We who have seen how proudly she prepared
 For sacrifice, how radiantly her face
 Flashed when the bugle blew its bloody sounds
 And bloody weather fluttered her old Flag,
 We who have seen her with the red heaps round ;

We who have heard how in the darkest hour
 The greatest might breaks out, and in the time
 Of trial she reveals her noblest strength.
 We do not, will not, cannot fear for Her,
 We who have felt her big heart beat in ours.

The Crimean War also quickened the pen of Trench, later Archbishop of Dublin, into spirited verses on the Alma, and others. *The Unforgotten*, in honour of the soldier victims of sickness, is perhaps the only poetic tribute to those who merit one as much as any :

Sad doom, to know a mighty work in hand
 Which shall from all the ages honour win ;
 Upon the threshold of this work to stand,
 Arrested there, while others enter in.
 Heaven gave to them a glory stern, austere,
 A glory of all earthly glory shorn,
 With firm heart to accept fate's gift severe,
 Bravely to bear the thing that must be borne.
 To see such visions fade and turn to nought,
 And in this saddest issue to consent ;
 If only the great work be duly wrought
 That others should accomplish it, content.

Sir Francis Doyle celebrated the Light Brigade with *Balaclava*, and wrote *The Return of the Guards* in 1856,—most of them other men than the heroes of Lushington's muster.

Lastly, I hope to be acquitted of filial partiality in quoting from my father's poem *A Monument for Scutari*, where Florence Nightingale worked:

.

Write that, when pride of human skill
 Fell prostrate with the weight of care,
 And men prayed out for some strong will,
 Some reason 'mid the wild despair,
 The loving heart of woman rose
 To guide the hand and clear the eye,
 Gave hope amid the sternest woes,
 And saved what man had left to die.

Write every name—lowlier the birth,
 Loftier the death!—and trust that when
 On this regenerated earth
 Rise races of ennobled men,
 They will remember—these were they
 Who strove to make the nations free,
 Not only from the sword's brute sway,
 But from the spirit's slavery.

I do not know why our Indian wars have inspired so little good poetry. Probably the risk of going wrong in laying on the exotic colour may have deterred some, for from the days of Tipu Sultan to those of Yakub Khan there has been no dearth of British or native heroes, and of a brilliant background for their deeds. Gerald Massey was one of the daring writers of the West, with *Havelock's March*, and other Mutiny poems; and Sir Francis Doyle wrote *Mehrab Khan* and *The Red Thread of Honour*—the Frontier tale (told also by James Ashcroft Noble) of how the tribesmen conferred that barbaric Victoria Cross on dead British soldiers. Tennyson's *Defence of Lucknow* is not of his first mastery, but it illustrates that peculiar capacity for describing a long struggle without becoming wearisome which is conspicuous in *The Passing of Arthur*. Sir Alfred Lyall modestly said of his delightful *Verses Written in India*, 'they are little better than scraps, written at sundry times and in divers places, during my Indian service'; several of them, including the justly admired *Theology in Extremis*, date from the two Mutiny years.

The Chinese War called forth Sir Francis Doyle's *Private of the Buffs*, too familiar to quote here; and most of the leading poets had something to tell of battles long ago. Tennyson's *The Revenge* was

judged by Stevenson to be 'one of the noblest ballads in the English Language'. I have heard other critics complain that its movement is too slow, but I doubt if any sailor would agree. The art that I mentioned just now, of depicting a long-drawn struggle without becoming long-winded, is here in perfection; and if it be admitted that the action is rapid enough for the occasion, the other two indispensables, dignity and directness, are surely not missing. Browning's *Hervé Riel*, a seventeenth-century episode of the Battle of the Hogue, is quite properly in a different vein of cloak-and-sword drama, a gallant tribute to a humble and successful enemy. His ballads of the Civil War show all the necessary dash and spirit. *Sohrab and Rustum* is not quite so Homeric as Matthew Arnold wanted to make it, but it is an exceedingly fine poem, and should be given to every boy when he begins to know good verses from bad. But it hardly belongs to our category, neither does Swinburne's great Stuart trilogy; while Mr. Gosse has lately shown us how remote the spirit of *Songs before Sunrise* and the other Republican poems is from that of regular war-poetry. Francis Palgrave, chief marshal of the lists, entered them himself with *Sidney at Zutphen* and some Crimean poems; and Aytoun's *Burial March of Dundee* and other animated Scottish ballads rightly continue to hold their own.

It will not do entirely to pass over the Irish writers of the nineteenth century, before the Gaelic revival, though they do not provide much material. Thomas Moore satirized *The Holy Alliance* at length, but was silent on the war which originated it. Mangan and Thomas Davis and Gavan Duffy were all politically rather than martially inspired, perhaps; but the last two wrote some stirring verses, not specifically anti-British, yet returnable as war-poetry. Once more, with apologetic piety, I recall my father's poem *The Death of Sarsfield*, with the hero taking his blood in his hand and saying:

O God, that this were only shed for Ireland.

It is foreign to my purpose to offer any estimate of books by living writers. It would be tempting to pay a tribute to Mr. Hardy's unique product of genius and industry *The Dynasts*, comparable to a procession winding through a vast dim amphitheatre, with strong vivid figures standing out here and there, and the endless tramp of feet punctuated at intervals by noble music. But I must refrain; and the striking poetry, mostly of the ballad type, that dates from the South African War must also be passed by. For different reasons I hold myself debarred from even touching on the American poetry of

war; that some of it is very memorable is recalled by the names of Whitman, and Lowell, and Whittier, and Bret Harte.

I do not know whether it is possible, but I doubt it, to draw any dividing line between the war-poetry of the study and that illuminated by personal experience. The rough survey that I have attempted does not point to any such general distinction. Lovelace and Montrose and Dorset obviously could not have written their particular poems had they been men of the robe; and it was no doubt a lucky chance that Campbell had spent the summer of 1800 in the Valley of the Iser and that he passed along the Danish coast in returning from Hamburg to England. Sir Alfred Lyall, too, saw some sharp fighting in the Mutiny. But I have mentioned Sidney and Raleigh as evidence on the other side; and there are plenty of writers to quote from among the dead, and from among living poets like Mr. Kipling and Sir Henry Newbolt, who have made particular fights visible and real without having taken part in them.

By a corresponding paradox it seems that the soldier who is also a writer is as likely to set his mind on green fields and spring flowers as on the bloody drama in which he is an actor, and to tune his lyre accordingly. When Wolfe made his famous recitation of the *Elegy* I dare say he was recalling

The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,

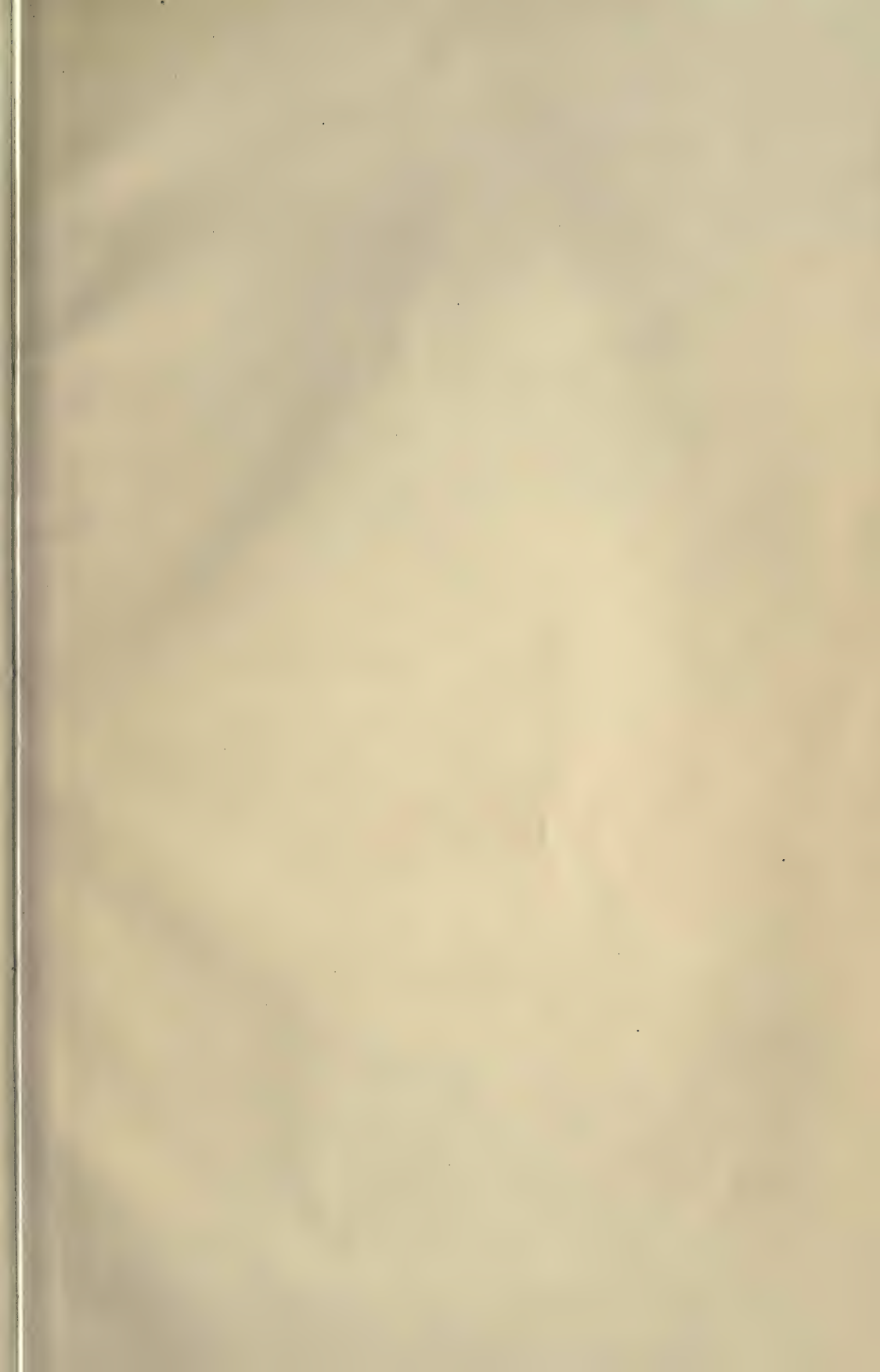
quite as much as musing on the reflection that

The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Campbell's *Soldier's Dream* is often a day-dream. So that among the verse written by soldiers in this war it is not surprising to find as many poems recalling loves of home and memories of country days as proclaiming the delight of battle, or even the loftier summons of patriotism and duty. Some of this work of to-day, as we all know, transcends the lyrical faculty which is the frequent appanage of youth, and reaches the level of true poetry; some of it is made sacred by the death of the writer, and cannot be coldly weighed in the balance.

It may be, perhaps it is bound to be, that of the highest poetry of the world no great part falls within the title of this Address. 'The infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power' into which, as Hazlitt says, objects are moulded by the poetic imagination may not be at the ordinary service of those who write of war. Apart from such outpourings of patriotic fervour as Wordsworth's, the tendency and temptation are towards the 'mere drum and trumpet'; or to a note

of romance which may not ring quite true ; or to the purely narrative form,—‘on the borderland between poetry and prose’, as Coleridge said—which seems poor and meagre beside the prose of Clarendon, or Southey, or Napier, or Froude. But there is plenty for us to honour as Englishmen in this harvest of five hundred years, of which I have tried to gather up a few stray ears to-day.



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